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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005225

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: DEMOCRAT PARTY LEADER ON ELECTION, GOVERNMENT
TURMOIL, BURMA, ECONOMY

REF: A. BANGKOK 5182 (SHUFFLE EXPECTED)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 5076 (CHATURON ON ELECTION)
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 4996 (DP ELECTION OUTLOOK)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva told the Ambassador that his party had a good chance of placing first in the December election. In an October 2 lunch, Abhisit said he believed recent turmoil in the government appeared designed to delay the election, but he believed it would take place as scheduled. He felt former Army Commander Sonthi Boonyaratglin joining the cabinet would not meaningfully affect election processes or results. (Sonthi subsequently received an appointment as Deputy Prime Minister, while press reports indicated Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont would take on responsibility for the Interior Ministry.) Abhisit discussed possible constitutional reform and amnesty for Thai Rak Thai party executives. The Ambassador recommended the Thais take a stronger line on repression in Burma, but Abhisit was wary that pressure from ASEAN would just increase Burmese ties with China and India. Abhisit envisioned a moderate pick-up in economic activity after elections. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Ambassador, joined by the DCM and other Embassy officers, hosted lunch at the EMR for Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva on October 2. Abhisit was accompanied by former Ambassador Kasit Piromya, who is rumored to be the leading DP contender to become Foreign Minister; Korn Chatikavanij, who is positioned for a cabinet job handling economic or financial matters; and advisors Anik Amranand and Isra Sunthornvut.

ELECTION

[1](#)3. (C) Abhisit told the Ambassador he believed the upcoming election would primarily feature a competition between his Democrat Party (DP) and the People's Power Party (PPP), and he said the DP had a good chance to win a plurality. Noting PPP seemed to be laying the groundwork for later complaints

of unfair election processes, Abhisit said this reinforced his view that PPP had a reasonable chance of placing second at the polls. Current predictions of a massive PPP victory in the Northeast (ref B) were unrealistic, Abhisit said, although PPP's turnout in that region would depend partly on the performance of certain unproven, newly-established parties which might be able to take votes away from PPP. Without providing numerical projections, he projected a strong DP performance in the North (excepting only Chiang Rai and Phayao provinces) and the Central region (although conceding strong competition in Suphan Buri, Sa Kaeo, and Chachoengsao provinces).

¶4. (C) If PPP were to win a plurality in the election, the pro-Thaksin party most likely could form a government, Abhisit said. He noted that a plurality would provide legitimacy for PPP and political cover for the opportunists outside of PPP who would be willing to accept Thaksin's money. When the Ambassador asked how the military would react to the prospect of a PPP-led government, Abhisit indicated he had no basis to believe that brand new Army Commander Anupong Paojinda would interfere in political processes (despite Anupong's leading role in the 2006 coup); however, he said Thai people would "come out into the streets" to protest against a prospective PPP administration.

¶5. (C) Commenting on recent cabinet turmoil (ref A), Abhisit claimed this reflected the efforts of some legislators and others who feared that allies of Thaksin would return to power. Abhisit saw the pressure on Prime Minister Surayud as part of an effort to delay the election, but he believed this effort would fail, because Surayud, consistent with the desire of the majority of Thai people, was determined to have

BANGKOK 00005225 002 OF 003

elections soon.

¶6. (C) Abhisit said that his projections for the election would remain unaffected by the entry of coup leader and former Army Commander Sonthi Boonyaratglin into the cabinet, either as a Deputy Prime Minister or as Interior Minister. (Note: Later in the day on October 2, Sonthi did receive appointment as Deputy Prime Minister, and Surayud announced that he himself would take on the responsibilities of the Interior Minister. End Note.) Parenthetically, Abhisit said that if Sonthi were to join the current cabinet, it might be more difficult for the DP to offer him a position in a subsequent administration.

¶7. (C) Abhisit characterized the Election Commission (EC) as neutral, and he dismissed concerns the EC would unfairly target PPP candidates, although he conceded the EC members lacked experience. He regretted that the EC had not yet delineated the districts for the regional party list system, but he said he preferred the new electoral system featuring multi-member election districts. The larger districts would reduce the impact of money politics, he predicted, help candidates to focus on national vice strictly local issues, and force parties to select candidates with broader appeal.

POLITICAL AGENDA -----

¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked Abhisit's view of a possible amnesty for the former Thai Rak Thai (TRT) executives who had lost their political rights when the Constitutional Tribunal dissolved TRT. Abhisit said he could imagine the legislature granting amnesty after a criminal court determined individual culpability for the offenses that had led to TRT's dissolution. After that determination, those who were uninvolved in improprieties could receive amnesty, Abhisit suggested.

¶9. (C) Most political parties seemed to favor constitutional amendment of some sort after the next election, Abhisit said. He noted it might be difficult, however, to build a

consensus among the parties on how to proceed. He believed a sensible approach would be to establish a legislative committee to work with certain think tanks (e.g., the King Prajadhipok Institute) to develop options. Abhisit said he found it difficult to predict the public's mood after the next election, and he could not estimate a time frame for constitutional reform. He voiced a personal opinion that the Senate -- which under the 2007 Constitution will be partially-elected and partially-appointed -- should be transformed into a partisan and wholly-elected body, or stripped of its role in impeachment, or abolished entirely.

BURMA

¶10. (C) The Ambassador explained that the RTG could improve its international standing by taking a stronger line against repression in Burma. Abhisit remarked that the new ASEAN Charter might enable ASEAN to become more active, as the Charter should enable the establishment of a human rights mechanism and allow ASEAN to operate without requiring consensus, even to act against a member state that deviates from the region's norms. Abhisit opposed Burma's expulsion from ASEAN, though, saying that this would simply reduce ASEAN's leverage and drive Burma into the arms of China and India. The DCM asked whether Abhisit believed Thai public opinion was seized with events in Burma; Abhisit replied that he did not believe so.

ECONOMY

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Abhisit sensed substantial Thai interest in domestic investment that would materialize after elections. Abhisit said he felt there was only a moderate degree of such interest, but it could be further stimulated by the installation of a new government

BANGKOK 00005225 003 OF 003

with a clear cut economic plan, and investment could snowball over time. A positive international response to the elections would also help the Thai economy, Abhisit said. The Ambassador suggested that the next administration might want to resume free trade discussions, and repair the damage done by the interim administration's issuance of compulsory licenses for certain pharmaceutical products.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Figures associated with PPP, and even some Democrats, tend to believe PPP is on track to outperform the DP by a significant margin (ref B and C). We are wary that Abhisit may have stuck disingenuously to overly optimistic talking points during this meeting. However, he seemed sincere in estimating that the election would most likely take place as scheduled, and we note that the Democrats are spending funds on campaign activities, seemingly backing up this perception with actions. We would consider it a good sign if Prime Minister Surayud does indeed take on responsibility for the Interior Ministry, rather than handing this position to one of the central coup leaders.

BOYCE